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MRS. BRIGHT'S VISITOR

By
MARY R. P. HATCH

Boston
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MRS. BRIGHT'S VISITOR

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MRS. BRIGHT'S VISITOR

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By

MARY R. P. HATCH

Author of "The Missing Man," "Mademoiselle Vivine," etc.

BOSTON

THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

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NOTE

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MRS. BRIGHT'S VISITOR

THE scene represents a dining room in a small house situated in the suburb of a city in New England. One or two pictures, a bird cage, some plants at the windows, several chairs, a writing desk down right front and the dining table in the center are inexpensive but of fairly good design. There are doors leading to left and right, while at the back center a door opening into the room leads down to the cellar. The kitchen is at the left back center, the bedroom at the right center.

Mr. and Mrs. Bright have just risen from the table and some food still remains. He is neatly dressed in a well-brushed business suit which shows, however, signs of long wear; his wife is neatly attired. She appears brisk and capable as she bustles about the room and table, but his manner is worried.

MR. BRIGHT: We ought to have taken that money to the bank last night, Ruth.

MRS. BRIGHT: How could we? Five miles through the rain and the road washed out in places?

MR. BRIGHT: Well, we might have taken it over to Mr. Culvert's and paid it on the place.

MRS. BRIGHT: The money is perfectly safe, Cliff. Nobody knows it's in the house, and we can take it down tonight. Had you forgotten that Mr. Culvert was to be away from home last night?

MR. BRIGHT: I did forget for the moment, Ruth.

MRS. BRIGHT: Well, he will be at home tonight, and I can return Mrs. Culvert's call. I like her very much, Cliff, and you know there aren't many people to visit.

MR. BRIGHT: I know it. And you really should get acquainted with some of the best people; then you won't be so lonesome.

MRS. BRIGHT: Oh, I'm never lonesome.

(*She speaks briskly and piles the plates on the table and starts to carry them to the kitchen. Mr. Bright takes his hat and gloves, preparing to leave the house. He stops and awaits his wife's return.*)

MRS. BRIGHT (*laughing*): What is it? Still worrying about that five hundred dollars?

MR. BRIGHT: Yes, I am. What would you do if a burglar should come?

MRS. BRIGHT: Shoot him, I think. You know I keep that loaded revolver right here. (*She opens a small drawer in desk and takes out a pistol.*)

MR. BRIGHT: You would be afraid to fire it. (*Takes it and examines it carefully.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Oh, no, I shouldn't. I've killed squirrels, you know. I shouldn't mind shooting a burglar any more.

MR. BRIGHT (*laughing*): I believe you. But I've spoken to Dempster for that big dog of his. He stands so high (*spreading his hand three feet above the floor*). He's a St. Bernard, Ruth. Dempster said he would bring him over last week. I don't see why he didn't. I wish we had him.

MRS. BRIGHT: I'm not one bit afraid, Cliff.

MR. BRIGHT: But if anything should happen.

MRS. BRIGHT: I should have emergency strength. That's what mother calls it. When our house caught fire I was a little girl, but I lifted one side of a heavy bureau

filled with clothing and books that father and I tumbled into it. I was as strong as he. The next day I couldn't lift a quarter as much. (*She laughs lightly and her husband joins.*)

MR. BRIGHT: Your uncle told me of your tumbling into the well and hanging to the bucket while your mother pulled you out.

MRS. BRIGHT (*laughs heartily*): Yes, that was at grandfather's. I was leaning over the curb and pitched in. "If I only can catch on to the bucket," I thought. You see they kept it in the water so it wouldn't dry up. I did catch on and hang on till I saw mother's white face looking down on me. "Can you climb into the bucket?" she said. "No, but I can hold on, mother," I said, and I did. It was a long cold journey, with mother tugging at the well sweep. We were both sick for a week afterwards.

MR. BRIGHT: You were a strange child, Ruth.

MRS. BRIGHT: I was always getting into trouble, but I always got out somehow. So you needn't worry one little bit. (*Reaches up to kiss her husband.*) But of course there's no danger. Don't worry, Cliff.

MR. BRIGHT (*laughs and returns her kiss*): Capable Ruth. No, I won't worry. We shall soon be monarchs of all we survey. When that money that's hidden in the bed is paid I shall feel as if we owned the place.

MRS. BRIGHT: We own it now. You know that five hundred is the last payment we have to make for five years, Cliff.

MR. BRIGHT: That's right.

MRS. BRIGHT (*enthusiastically*): Oh, this is so much better than a flat, "stale and unprofitable" in the

city. (*Claps her hands and looks up at him joyfully*). Not another house in sight, but trees, trees everywhere, and birds and cones and squirrels. Oh, I'm so delighted. And the money is in the house this very minute. I am so happy that once I should have been afraid that something terrible was to happen; but now I know that the right way is to enjoy everything to the utmost.

MR. BRIGHT: And I will try to do the same, Ruth. I am glad you are not timid. There wouldn't be much happiness for you in this lonely place if you were. But this won't do for me. I've stood talking all this time when I should have been at the office. (*Takes some papers from the desk and turns to go again.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Oh, but, Cliff—

MR. BRIGHT: What is it?

MRS. BRIGHT: One thing I would like to have you attend to when you have time. (*She points to the cellar door.*) Now don't think I am afraid, but there is no lock or bolt on that cellar door, and if anybody should get in the cellar he could come up the stairs and right into this room.

MR. BRIGHT: But there's no danger because we always keep the outside door locked.

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes, Cliff, I know we are supposed to, but sometimes your father comes in to look at the things he has stored there and goes out the back way. Yesterday I found it open.

MR. BRIGHT: That so? Well, I'll bring home a bolt tonight and put it on myself. Goodbye, dearest. Take care of my little girl for the sake of her husband.

MRS. BRIGHT: Same to you, dearie. (*Exit Mr. Bright. Mrs. Bright watches him from the window and*

waves a salute. She opens the door to the cellar, closes it and sets a chair before it, then takes it away again. Next she goes to the desk and takes from the drawer the pistol, examines it carefully; then she puts it back and resumes her work. She takes a carpet sweeper and runs it over the rug, then lifts the corners and sweeps the floor with a broom, all with extreme neatness and dispatch. She takes a cloth duster and dusts the rungs of the chairs and desk, and when she has finished these duties she arranges the table neatly, making it apparent that it is her habit to leave the table set as is the manner in some country places. But she is about to remove the food when she hears a sound in the cellar. Instantly a look of alarm rises to her face. She listens intently with her head turned towards the door. But no other sound is heard and after a while spent in listening she looks about with a distinct air of relief growing on her face. She sits down and takes some sewing which she brings from the bedroom and sets a few stitches, sewing happily for a few moments. Then again a sound is heard, but so distinct this time there can be no doubt that it comes from the cellar. Mrs. Bright rises quickly and stands in the middle of the room, every faculty tense and rampant. She looks first at the drawer where the pistol reposes, taking a step toward it. Then her face registers a sudden resolve. It is as if she had made a decision. Reaching forward she opens the door so quickly that the burglar, whose hand has been extended to reach the knob, lurches suddenly forward. He is blinking from the light coming after the darkness of the cellar. He is shabbily dressed, his face is covered with whiskers, and he seems not only cold, but hungry, for he looks ravenously at the remnants of food on the table.)

MRS. BRIGHT (*speaking politely, as if her visitors usually came up the cellar stairs*): Come in and sit down by the fire, you look cold. (*He gives her a glance of surprise and lurches heavily into the chair she pushes toward him.*) I see by your look at the table that you haven't had any breakfast. (*She looks at the table and nods at him brightly.*)

BURGLAR: No, nor any supper nor anything at all for 'most a week, except what I snatched from a garbage pail.

MRS. BRIGHT: I should think you would be just starved. Wait a minute till I get some more bread. You will want some more meat, too. Sit right down. (*She draws up the chair nearest to the table. The man looks at her suspiciously, then at the table. Evidently its attractions are stronger than his fears, for he sits and begins eating ravenously. She goes to the kitchen, his eyes following her movements while he eats. She returns with bread and other food, arranging it neatly on the table.*)

BURGLAR: Does your man come home pretty soon?

MRS. BRIGHT: No. Have some more meat? (*She pushes the plate toward him*). Perhaps you will relish some of this pudding. I made it myself. I do nearly all my cooking. You see, Cliff—that's my husband—lived in a boarding house so many years that he abominates "store victuals" as he says. (*He stops eating to stare at her for a moment, then goes on, she waiting upon him politely. Finally his appetite seems to be satisfied. Seeing him shiver she turns the damper to the stove and puts in a stick of wood.*) We've had terrible cold weather, haven't we, for this time of year? The papers say we are going to have snow; but they don't know quite everything.

though you'd think so sometimes to read what they say. (*Laughs lightly.*)

BURGLAR (*shifting about uneasily*): There ain't no use talking as if you didn't know what I come for. You ain't no fool. You must know I didn't get into the cellar and hang around all night and this morning till your husband went away jest to talk about the weather nor to get a meal of victuals, even if I was starving. (*Speaks gruffly, but does not look at her.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: It was you then that left the cellar door open?

BURGLAR: Yes, but that ain't no consequence, is it, how I got in? It's what I came for.

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes; what did you come for?

BURGLAR: I come for that five hundred dollars. I heard your man tell a friend that he was going to pay it on his place. It was on the cars I heard it. He didn't pay it last night. I know because I watched round all night. So it's in the house, and I want it. It's in there. (*Points to the bedroom at right back center.*) I know, for I heard you and him talking about it when I crept up them stairs (*glances at cellar stairs*). It's there, and I mean to have it. Do you hear? (*Advances toward her in threatening manner.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes, I hear (*speaks calmly*), but I don't believe it. (*She begins to clear the table of the food in a leisurely manner and carries the food and dishes to the kitchen at the left. He follows her to the door and watches her until she returns.*) What I can't understand is that a man like you would even once think of taking money from a woman.

BURGLAR: I wouldn't if I didn't need it like hell. (*He looks at her and shifts his feet uneasily.*)

MRS. BRIGHT (*pushes a chair toward him*): Sit down and talk it over. (*He sits down as if compelled to against his will.*) You say you need money, but so do we. We are in debt for this house, and that money will have to be paid on it or the mortgage will be foreclosed.

BURGLAR: Hire it.

MRS. BRIGHT: We can't. There isn't a person in the world we could hire it of.

BURGLAR: That's bad.

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes; and you can never know how hard we've worked to get and save it. Why, Cliff (that's my husband), went without luncheons a whole year—pretended he wasn't hungry at noon—just to save. (*The burglar looks interested in spite of himself.*)

BURGLAR: There ain't no fool job in going hungry, but he could fill up nights when he got home, have a good square meal.

MRS. BRIGHT: But that isn't all. We saved in every way. I made over my clothes till I couldn't any longer.

BURGLAR (*looking her over sarcastically*): Don't look so very shabby.

MRS. BRIGHT: That's because you don't know that this dress has been turned, made over and colored. And Cliff has only one good suit. I press the trousers every Saturday night so as to have them look nice for the next week. But he's getting to look pretty shabby lately.

BURGLAR (*surlily*): What you 'spose I care? I bet he ain't as shabby as I be. I've worked as hard as you and him to get a living. Look at me. I hain't had a

square meal for a month till tonight, and these fancy clothes of mine is all I got.

MRS. BRIGHT: Can't you get any work?

BURGLAR: No.

MRS. BRIGHT: Have you tried?

BURGLAR: Tried? I have done everything but knock a man down and tell him he'd got to give me work. I tell you there ain't no work. Everybody is turning off instead of taking on. I had a good place, foreman in a portable mill, but the mill shet down, and I lost that job. Then I worked a spell in a stable; the boss sold his horses, couldn't afford to keep 'em, he said. I hain't had no work sence.

MRS. BRIGHT: Can't you run a car? There's lots of money in that.

BURGLAR: It cost money to learn, and it takes time. I'd starve before I got a job.

MRS. BRIGHT: There must be something for you to do.

BURGLAR: There's jest one thing and I'm going to do it. I've got to live or die, and I ain't quite ready to die yet. So I'm going to get money dishonest, seeing I can't get it honest. It's the only way left. Hurry up. I can't wait all day. (*Speaks gruffly and takes a step toward her threateningly. Mrs. Bright rises slowly and approaches the desk where the pistol is. She opens the drawer and after a moment takes out a piece of fancy work. Sitting down again she begins to sew while the burglar watches her as if fascinated.*) You're a cool piece. (*She sets a few more stitches, then rises and folds up the table cloth.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Are you a stranger here?

BURGLAR: Yes, I be. I walked over from the plain yesterday and I've been hanging round ever sence to get that money. Now step lively. I can't waste no more time.

MRS. BRIGHT (*Lays aside her work and looks up cheerfully*): I've thought it all out for you, and I'll tell you what I will do. I will *lend* you some money.

BURGLAR: Lend me some money?

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes; you hadn't thought of that, had you?

BURGLAR: No.

MRS. BRIGHT: You see I can't give it to you, for Cliff would never forgive me. You see we've worked so hard to get it together. I can't let you have it. (*She looks at him with trembling lips, but steady eyes.*)

BURGLAR: I don't see but you'll have to. I don't want to use any force, but I'm going to have that money. I've starved long enough. A good straight meal makes me all the more determined. Five hundred dollars would put me on Easy Street.

MRS. BRIGHT: But it would put us on Uneasy Street. No; I can't give you the money, but I will lend you some money, and you can pay me when you get work. How much will do you? (*She puts her head on one side a little in a birdlike way which seems to interest the man, for he watches her intently and does not reply.*) I might lend you ten or twenty dollars.

BURGLAR: Say now, what you mean by that? You lend me ten or twenty dollars? Don't you know I can take the whole?

BURGLAR: Why won't I when I come to do it?

MRS. BRIGHT: Because you are too much of a man to steal when I am willing to lend you some money. I will let you have twenty-five if you think twenty won't be enough. But you must promise to pay it back just as soon as you can.

BURGLAR (*grinning, seemingly touched by the humor of it*): Do you really think I will pay it back?

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes, I know you will if you can. I'm just as sure of it as I can be. You want to be honest and you've tried to be; but you've got discouraged. Such bad luck would discourage anybody. You didn't think you could borrow money, did you?

BURGLAR (*drily*): No; most folks would shy at lending twenty-five dollars to a tramp. Perhaps you would if I had come through the front door instead of up the cellar stairs.

MRS. BRIGHT: Perhaps I would. You see we need every dollar. But I have an uncle who might lend me that amount, although he is a poor man. And when you pay me back I will pay him. Now I will write a note for you to sign. (*She sits down to the desk with her knees against the drawer where the loaded pistol is and writes the note. The man watches her wonderingly, rubbing his face, resting his arm on his hand, fidgetting generally. When she turns around he starts nervously. Reads.*) "For value received I promise to pay Ruth A. Bright twenty-five dollars on demand. (*She reads slowly, the man listens intently.*)

BURGLAR: You don't say *when*, but "on demand."

MRS. BRIGHT: No; because I don't know when you can get around to pay it. I don't really demand it either,

for I shouldn't know where to find you. Sign here. (*She points to the place with her pen. Squaring his shoulders, his face taking on a new look he signs his name and hands her the note.*)

MRS. BRIGHT (*reads*): John Perham.

BURGLAR: Yes, that's my name, and I mean to pay that note, and I believe I can. You see I shall have something to live on while I am looking for a job. (*She goes to the bedroom after the money and he stands with his back to the door, not even looking over his shoulder to watch her. She returns with five five dollar bills, which she hands to him cordially.*) One, two, three, four, five, and there you are (*smiling*).

BURGLAR: Thank you. (*Turns away his head.*) I'll pay it back, sure.

MRS. BRIGHT: I know you will. But you need better clothes. Would you mind wearing a suit of my husband's?

BURGLAR: I ain't proud.

MRS. BRIGHT (*looking him over*): He's about your size. It isn't a very good suit, but one that he puts on occasionally.

BURGLAR: Thank you. If I don't have to buy clothes the money will last longer.

MRS. BRIGHT: That's just what I was thinking of. (*He stands in the middle of the room while she goes to the bedroom, looking at the money in his hand. She returns with the clothing, which includes a cloth cap, a pair of shoes, and a shirt. Leaving them on the chair she goes back for a suitcase. She packs them deftly, he all the time watching her.*) There, I guess that will do. (*Hands the case to him with a smile.*)

BURGLAR (*in trembling tones*): I never thought—I never knew—that there was such a woman as you in the world. My mother run away when I was a kid and my sisters—no matter about them—I never saw such a woman as you be. I thought you was a fool at first; honest I did; but I know now that you are a good woman that knows more than most folks do. But say, didn't it jar—I mean wasn't you frightened when I come up the cellar stairs?

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes, at first, I suppose I was; but in a second something told me what to do. I saw that you were unfortunate, and I am always sorry for anyone like that. (*The door bell rings, three pulls.*)

BURGLAR (*looks about as if for a place to hide*): Who's that? (*He is now the man he was when he entered.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: It is my husband; but I won't let him in until you get away. Hurry. You know the way. (*Opens the cellar door while her husband rings again and again.*)

BURGLAR: Won't he follow me when he finds out?

MRS. BRIGHT: No; I won't tell him until tonight. Goodbye and good luck. Inside of a year you'll come back and pay me.

BURGLAR: I will, so help me. (*He disappears down the stairs while Mr. Bright rings until she hears the cellar door close, when she opens the door and falls a limp weight into her husband's arms.*)

MR. BRIGHT: Good heavens, Ruth, what is it? I began to think you had gone away. How long have you been sick? (*He puts her gently on a chair and places a pillow behind her head.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Not long. I shall be all right soon. It is just a nervous strain. Don't ask me any questions, will you?

MR. BRIGHT: You've been working too hard, Ruth, that's what's the matter. (*He leans over her and she leans her head on his shoulder, smiling weakly.*)

MRS. BRIGHT: Why did you come home so soon, Cliff?

MR. BRIGHT: I can't explain it, but I suppose it worried me, our talk about that money after you told me about the cellar door being left open. Of course, I knew it was perfectly safe; but I decided not to risk it any longer. So I've brought home a bolt, and if you will tell me where I can find the screw driver I'll put it right on, so you'll be safe. (*She starts to rise.*) No don't get up. I'll find it. Sit still.

MRS. BRIGHT: Oh, I'm all right now. (*Gets the screw driver from the kitchen and watches him while he puts on the bolt. They talk as he works, she sitting on the arm of the chair and helping him by handing him the different tools, an awl, screw driver and hammer.*)

MR. BRIGHT: Just as soon as I get this done we will go and pay that money, won't we? You say you feel all right now.

MRS. BRIGHT: Hadn't we better wait until after supper, Cliff?

MR. BRIGHT: No, we won't wait. Someone may come and prevent our going if we wait, and that money must be paid before another day. There, that's all right. (*Stands back and looks at the bolt.*) I was cut out for a carpenter.

MRS. BRIGHT: Yes, that's a good job, Cliff. I wish you would do a few other things for me, will you?

MR. BRIGHT: No, not now. Put your duds on and get that money. You'll feel better for the ride. (*She goes to the bedroom and returns with a large roll of bills. He runs it over, then as if thinking he has made a mistake, counts it again. He looks anxiously at his wife.*) I can't make this come out right, Ruth. There should be five hundred dollars and I make it four hundred and seventy-five.

MRS. BRIGHT: That's what it is, Cliff. I lent twenty-five to a man this afternoon.

MR. BRIGHT (*angrily*): Were you crazy, Ruth? You must have been to lend it when we needed it all to pay on that mortgage. Who was it?

MRS. BRIGHT: He said his name was John Perham.

MR. BRIGHT: John Perham, John Perham. I don't know any John Perham.

MRS. BRIGHT (*speaks hastily*): He came up through that door. He was here when you—

MR. BRIGHT: And you kept me outside while a thief got away with twenty-five dollars. I wouldn't have believed it if you hadn't told me yourself. And you so capable. Capable! (*Speaks disgustedly*).

MRS. BRIGHT: Just listen. You don't understand how capable I was. He might have taken the whole, and I lent him twenty-five dollars. He will pay it back, too. (*Her husband gives a low whistle*). I was frightened horribly when I heard him coming up the cellar stairs, then all at once I seemed to get "emergency strength," and I opened the door and invited him in and gave him some breakfast. I treated him like a visitor, Cliff, only

I gave—I mean, lent him the money and your hunting suit. You'll have to hunt for it now. You know you can never find your clothes; and that in particular. (*She giggles nervously.*)

MR. BRIGHT: But the pistol, Ruth. You said you could use that.

MRS. BRIGHT: I thought once that I would. But I couldn't shoot an unarmed man. He was hungry and too wicked to die. I was led to do as I did.

MR. BRIGHT: It was wonderful that you weren't murdered, to say nothing of the money. But of course he will never pay it back.

MRS. BRIGHT: He will. I know he will, Cliff.

MR. BRIGHT: Well, all I have to say is, you beat the Dutch.

(*Curtain*)

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